Goodwife

Contents hide
(Top)
Usage
Colonial America
England
Shift towards "Mistress"
See also
References

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

This article is about the form of address. For other uses, see The Good Wife (disambiguation).

This article **needs additional citations for verification**. Please help improve this article by adding citations to reliable sources. Unsourced material may be challenged and removed.
Find sources: "Goodwife" – news · newspapers · books · scholar · JSTOR
(November 2010) (Learn how and when to remove this message)

Goodwife (Scots: *Guidwife*), usually abbreviated **Goody**, was a polite form of address for women, formerly used as *Mrs.*, *Miss* and *Ms.* are used today. Its male counterpart is Goodman. However, a woman addressed by this title was of a lesser social rank than a woman addressed as Mistress.

Goodwife and *Goody* were used in England, Scotland, and Colonial America, with the earliest known use circa 1325.[1] By the mid-18th century they had become archaic outside Scotland, and they are perhaps best known today as the forms of address used in period literature, like Arthur Miller's historical fiction *The Crucible*.

The title also appears in the expression *Goody Two-Shoes*, which is sometimes credited to the 1765 children's book *The History of Little Goody Two-Shoes*, though it was first used at least a century earlier.[2]

Usage [edit]

Goodwife is a term used to designate women of high social status, typically civilian wives.[3] However, in England, these were not people of the gentry.[4] Goodwives were typically involved in civilian duties but did not necessarily join in church activities.[5]

The term has also had very specific meanings for certain groups. Between 1523 and 1547, the term *goodwife* was used in Coventry cappers to denote wives who had taken over their husbands' businesses before or after their husbands' deaths.[6] There were some, especially ministers, who believed that this term should be used to address church members reflecting such member's moral status.[6]

Colonial America [edit]

The address *Goodwife* was coined in England and then used in colonial America.[5] By the time it migrated over, the term was already declining in popularity in England.[5] It remained in usage in New England until the early 1800s.[5] The term was also used in mid-Atlantic colonies as well, but was not used with any significant fervor in comparison to New England.[5] The decline of this address fell as Puritan ideals did.[5]

A precise definition of *Goodwife* in colonial America is elusive owing to the term's varied and ambiguous usage.[5] However, it can be linked to Puritan ideals as it was considered an address of respect.[5]

England [edit]

The address *Goodwife* was already declining in popularity by the 1700s in England. By this time, the address meant little to nothing; there is evidence of those who had commonly used the form of address now requested to be called Master or Mistress.[5] Also, around this time, people were listing no address or *Goodwife* interchangeably.[5]

While this term was to denote women of high social standing, there were terms for women above these. Above Goodwife was Madam and above that was Dame.[7] Despite *Goodwife* indicating lower social status than Madam or Dame, it was not considered an insult to address someone of lower status as Goodwife during times of high usage in England.[5] It was "an indication of good neighborliness."[5] However, in *Evelina*, Captain Mervin uses the term to insult his wife, who, as a member of the gentry, should be referred to as *Madame* or *Mistress*.

Shift towards "Mistress" [edit]

Goodwife was one of the many forms of address towards women at the time. While Goodwife and Mistress were used at the same point, there was a noticeable shift from calling women *Goodwife* to *Mistress* and ultimately the usage of Goodwife faded out around the 18th century. However, there is evidence that points towards Goodwife being used longer than Goodman.[5]

Regardless, the term did fade into obscurity all the same. This shifted as Puritan ideals were not held in such high regards, especially as the legal system moved towards secular trends in both England and New England.[5]

In England, the term *Goodwife* was not used by 1700.[5] By 1780, the forms of address *Master* or *Mister* and *Miss(tress)* were used almost universally despite social differences.[5] The only exception is that those women of especially high social status were called *Lady*.[5]

In modern use, *Goody* is generally associated with witches, probably as a result of Eunice Cole and Sarah Osborne and other women accused of witchcraft being referred to as *Goody* rather than by their first names. Several of the Ramtops Witches in Terry Pratchett's Discworld novels are given the title.

See also [edit]

- Young Goodman Brown

References [edit]

1. ^ "Goodwife". *Oxford English Dictionary* (Online ed.). Oxford University Press. (Subscription or participating institution membership required.)
2. ^ "Goody Two-Shoes". *American Notes and Queries*. **5** (1): 3. May 3, 1890.
3. ^ Riddy, Felicity (1996). "Mother Knows Best: Reading Social Change in a Courtesy Text". *Speculum*. **71** (1): 66–86. doi:10.2307/2865201. ISSN 0038-7134. JSTOR 2865201. S2CID 145345515.
4. ^ *Sociolinguistics and language history : studies based on the Corpus of early English correspondence*. Nevalainen, Terttu., Raumolin-Brunberg, Helena. Amsterdam: Rodopi. 1996. p. 26. ISBN 90-5183-982-0. OCLC 34690390.
5. ^ a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q Pablé, Adrian. "Reconstructing the History of Two Colonial New England terms of Address: Goodman and Goodwife". *Studies in English and European Historical Dialectology*: 233–252.
6. ^ a b Phythian-Adams, Charles (1979). "Desolation of a City: Coventry and the Urban Crisis of the Late Middle Ages". *The American Historical Review*. New York: Cambridge University Press: 91–92. doi:10.1086/ahr/87.4.1070-a. ISSN 1937-5239.
7. ^ Erickson, Amy Louise (2014). "Mistresses and Marriage: or, a Short History of the Mrs". *History Workshop Journal*. **78** (78): 39–57. doi:10.1093/hwj/dbt002. ISSN 1363-3554. JSTOR 43299025.

V · T · E **English social honorific titles** [hide]

Feminine	Gentlewoman · **Goodwife** · Mrs · Miss · Ms · Mistress · Madam · Noblewoman · Dame · Lady
Masculine	Gentleman · Goodman · Mr · Esquire · Master · Sir · Sire · Lord · Fr
Neutral	Mx · Dr

Categories: 14th-century neologisms | Women's social titles | History of women in the United Kingdom | History of women in the United States

This page was last edited on 8 August 2025, at 17:03 (UTC).

Text is available under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 License; additional terms may apply. By using this site, you agree to the Terms of Use and Privacy Policy. Wikipedia® is a registered trademark of the Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., a non-profit organization.

Privacy policy About Wikipedia Disclaimers Contact Wikipedia Code of Conduct Developers Statistics Cookie statement Mobile view

Wikimedia project
Powered by MediaWiki